

Rules of the Game

Actions (Part One)

By Skip Williams



Whether your roleplaying style leans toward kicking in doors and hacking up everything that moves or more toward detailed storytelling, chances are you expect your character to do a few things every adventure. Fortunately, the **D&D** game has plenty of rules governing how characters act. At the core of those rules lies the game's system of actions. When you understand the terminology and basic rules governing actions, you can avoid many errors and misunderstandings -- and head off many arguments.

The Language of Actions

Here are a few terms you'll encounter in this article.

- **Action:** The *Player's Handbook* glossary defines an action as a character activity, which doesn't tell the whole story. In practical terms, an action is something you do during your own turn that uses up time (usually) and changes (or has the potential to change) something in the game world. As a general rule, you can use an action only during your own turn. You sometimes can *act* during someone else's turn, but when you do so that's usually an extra activity for you, and it doesn't affect the actions available to you during your next turn.

PH pg 304: "action: A character activity. Actions are divided into the following categories, according to the time required to perform them (from most time to least): full-round actions, standard actions, move actions, and free actions."

The basic kinds of actions in the **D&D** game include standard actions, move actions, full-round actions, free actions, and nonactions.

- **Free Action:** A free action is an activity that takes only a minor amount of time. You can take any number of free actions during your turn, subject to your DM's approval. Taking one or more free actions doesn't affect the other actions available to you during your turn.
- **Full-Round Action:** A full-round action is an activity that effectively consumes all of your time during your turn. Consequently, you cannot use either a standard or a move action (see below) during a turn when you use a full-round action. You can, however, use a 5-foot step during a turn when you use a full-round action (see the nonaction entry). You also can use free actions during a turn when you use a full-round action.
- **Move Action:** A move action is an activity that allows you to move your speed across the battlefield or perform some other activity that takes a similar amount of time. You're allowed one move action during your turn. You can take a second move action during your turn in place of the standard action you're also allowed (see below). You cannot, however, take a second standard action in place of a move action.
- **Nonaction:** A nonaction is an activity that effectively takes no time at all (as opposed to a free action, which takes an insignificant amount of time), but it nevertheless involves some effort on your part. Often, a nonaction is something that you do as part of another action, such as making a Use Magic Device skill

check while trying to activate a magic wand. Activating the wand is a standard action and making the check is not an action at all. Some activities that are described in the rules as free actions are actually nonactions; one example is trying to establish a hold on a foe after a successful grab in a grapple attack. (Readers may remember the entry for "Not an Action" on page 139 of the *Player's Handbook*.)

PH pg 139: "Not an Action: Some activities are so minor that they are not even considered free actions. They literally don't take any time at all to do and are considered an inherent part of doing something else. For instance, using the Use Magic Device skill (page 85) while trying to activate a device is not an action, it is part of the standard action to activate a magic item."

A 5-foot step is a nonaction you can use to move a short distance when you don't otherwise move during your turn; see [Rules of the Game: All About Movement](#).

Many nonactions are things you can do when it's not your turn, such as making opposed checks to avoid being disarmed or tripped or making an attack of opportunity.

- **Standard Action:** A standard action is a kind of action that covers any activity you can perform and still have time left to move your speed during the same turn (see [Rules of the Game: All About Movement](#)). You are allowed only one standard action each turn, and sometimes you can't perform any standard actions at all.

Using Actions

In most cases, you have the following three options available to you during your turn (choose one):

- One standard action plus one move action.
- Two move actions.
- One full-round action.

You can add any number of nonactions or a reasonable number of free actions (your DM decides what's reasonable) to the option you choose. Some of these extras impose their own limits on what you can do; for example, you can take only one 5-foot step during your turn. Various expansions to the **D&D** rules introduce more ways to sneak in little extras while you act during your turn. An example is the immediate action from the *Expanded Psionics Handbook*. We'll take a look at those in Part Two.

You cannot combine your action options. For example, if you use the Multi-Shot feat, which allows you to fire multiple arrows as a standard action, you cannot also use the full attack action, which is a full-round action.

PH pg 137: "The Surprise Round: If some but not all of the combatants are aware of their opponents, a surprise round happens before regular rounds begin. Any combatants aware of the opponents can act in the surprise round, so they roll for initiative. In initiative order (highest to lowest), combatants who started the battle aware of their opponents each take a standard action during the surprise round (see Standard Actions, page 139). You can also take free actions during the surprise round, at the DM's discretion. If no one or everyone is surprised, no surprise round occurs."

Action Restrictions

Circumstances often reduce your options for acting. Sometimes, you simply don't have a complete round in which to act. Other times, you find yourself unable to act quickly or decisively.

Surprise Rounds: Whenever some combatants in a battle are aware of their opponents and some are not, the

battle begins with a surprise round (see page 137 in the *Player's Handbook*). Combatants who begin the combat aware of the opposition can act during a surprise round, but can use only a standard action during their turns (plus any free actions the DM allows and nonactions as appropriate). Remember that when you have a standard action available, you can use a move action instead (but not vice versa).

Character Conditions

Many conditions also restrict the actions you can perform. See page 300 in the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for a complete list of character conditions.

Ability Damaged or Drained: You become unable to act when any ability score is reduced to 0. When your Constitution score falls to 0 you die (see dead below). When your Strength score falls to 0 you collapse, limp as a rag doll. When your Dexterity falls to 0, you're paralyzed, unable to move a muscle. These latter two situations generally rule out any action or nonaction unless you have a way to affect yourself or your surroundings purely through mental activity. For example, moving with a *fly* or *levitate* spell doesn't require any physical activity, and either spell would allow you to use a move action to move at the speed the spell in question allows. Likewise, a *mage hand* or *telekinesis* spell would allow some move actions (such as picking up an item), some standard actions (such as lighting a torch with a tindertwig), or some full-round actions (such as lighting a torch with flint and steel). Some actions, such as concentrating to maintain an active spell, also are purely mental.

DMG pg 300: "Ability Damaged, Ability Drained, Blinded, Blown Away, Checked, Confused, Cowering, Dazed, Dazzled, Dead, Deafened, Disabled, Dying, Energy Drained, Entangled, Exhausted, Fascinated, Fatigued, Flat-Footed, Frightened, Grappling, Helpless, Incorporeal, Invisible, Knocked Down, Nauseated, Panicked, Paralyzed, Petrified, Pinned, Prone, Shaken, Sickened, Stable, Staggered, Stunned, Turned, Unconscious."

You can use free actions and nonactions while your Dexterity or Strength score is reduced to 0, provided such actions are purely mental.

It's reasonable for a DM to limit exactly what you can accomplish when your Strength or Dexterity is reduced to 0. After all, your field of vision and other faculties are likely to be restricted.

When your Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma falls to 0, parts of your brain shuts down and you lose consciousness. While unconscious, you cannot act at all.

Cowering: You cannot act when cowering.

Dazed: You cannot act when dazed.

Dead: When you're dead, your spirit departs and your body becomes a mere object. Neither your departed spirit nor your lifeless body can act. Of course, either your spirit or your body may regain some semblance of life, such as becoming an undead creature, but then you're no longer truly dead.

Disabled: You're limited to one move action or one standard action (you can't use both) when disabled. You cannot use a full-round action when disabled. If you use a standard action (or anything strenuous) while disabled, you take 1 point of damage after completing the action. See Part Two for more notes on the disabled condition.

Dying: When you're dying, you're unconscious and unable to act; see the notes under ability damage and ability

drain.

Fascinated: When fascinated, you must stand or sit quietly, taking no actions other than to pay attention to the source of your fascination. In effect, you use a standard action during your turn to focus on the source of your fascination, and you cannot move, or even take a 5-foot step, while fascinated.

Fatigued: When fatigued, you can neither run nor charge, but your actions aren't otherwise restricted.

Frightened: If you're frightened, you must use two move actions each round to flee from the source of your fright. If unable to flee, you can fight; you take a -2 penalty on all attack rolls, saving throws, skill checks, and ability checks.

Grappling: When engaged in a grapple (either holding onto a foe or in a foe's grasp) you can undertake only a limited number of actions, as noted on page 156 of the *Player's Handbook*.

Helpless: You cannot act when helpless.

Nauseated: When nauseated, you're limited to a single move action during your turn.

Panicked: If you're panicked, you must use two move actions each round to flee from the source of your panic. If unable to flee, you cower; you take a -2 penalty on all attack rolls, saving throws, skill checks, and ability checks.

Paralyzed: If paralyzed, you cannot act; see the notes under ability damage and ability drain.

Petrified: When you're petrified, you're considered unconscious; see the notes under ability damage and ability drain.

Pinned: Being pinned is just like being held in a grapple, except you have even fewer options. See page 156 of the *Player's Handbook* for details.

Prone: You cannot use a ranged weapon (except for a crossbow) when prone. Your actions aren't otherwise limited.

Stable: When you're stable you're also unconscious; see the notes under ability damage and ability drain.

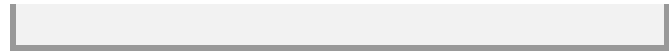
Staggered: When staggered, you can use a single move action or standard action each round (but not both, nor can you use a full-round action).

PH pg 156: "If You're Grappling: When you're grappling (regardless of who started the grapple), you can perform any of the following actions. Some of these actions take the place of an attack (rather than being a standard action or a move action). If your base attack bonus allows you multiple attacks, you can attempt one of these actions in place of each of your attacks, but at successfully lower base attack bonuses: activate a magic item, attack your opponent, cast a spell, damage your opponent, draw a light weapon, escape from grapple, move, retrieve a spell component, pin your opponent, break another's pin, use opponent's weapon."

PH pg 156: "When an opponent has pinned you, you are held immobile (but not helpless) for 1 round. While you're pinned, you take a -4 penalty to your AC against opponents other than the one pinning you. At your opponent's option, you may also be unable to speak. On your turn,

you can try to escape the pin by making an opposed grapple check in place of an attack. You can make an Escape Artist check in place of your grapple check if you want, but this requires a standard action. If you win, you escape the pin, but you're still grappling.."

Stunned: You can't act when stunned.



Turned: Turned creatures must make two move actions each round. If they cannot do so, they cower.

Unconscious: See the notes under ability damage and ability drain.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week we'll consider nonactions and how circumstances affect when you can perform them. We'll also take a longer look at the disabled condition.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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